Unit 2: The Evolution of Connotations and How History Alters Our Perceptions on Words

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**ABSTRACT:** In my paper, I focus heavily on the possible negative connotations of words that have been attributed to past infamous historic events or through the general evolution of language in itself. I discuss how modern day definitions vary from dictionary definitions, and argue that we as a society should be more aware of the connotations rather than the standard definitions when using said word. Words/symbols I include my paper include “ghetto,” “holocaust,” “tolerance,” “explicit,” “bossy,” and the Confederate Flag. With these words/symbols, I touch on gender variations, tones of words, changing of a word’s definition to coexist with another word, and the massive historical context that can be greatly attributed to a words usage.

**KEYWORDS:** *evolution/history of connotations, positive/negative connotations, connotation of holocaust, ghetto, confederate flag, etc.*

Language is a complex concept. There are many variations of language from across the globe, words that sound alike but mean alternate things, words that don’t sound alike but mean the same thing, and so on. But there may not be a more complex facet of language than the connotations of words, and how even though two words can have the same dictionary definition, they can have different connotations from one another in a both positive and negative sense that have altered and evolved over the entirety of language.

According to Merriam Webster’s Online Dictionary, the word “connotation” is described as “an idea or quality that a word makes you think about in addition to its meaning.” In essence, a connotation is a concept in itself; there are many aspects that can contribute and dictate to what a singular word’s connotation is. One of the major contributing factors towards connotations is both the etymology and history of a word, as in what historical events have been associated with said word and how these events have altered the cosmetic definition of the word.

The word “ghetto” has long been discussed by both scholars and regular Joes alike for its mysterious origins. While many languages and cultures have claimed to have originated the coined English term, etymologists have determined the word to be fair game and that the word’s original meaning was, "the quarter in a city, chiefly in Italy, to which the Jews were restricted,” according to the Oxford English Dictionary. These meaning was chiefly derived from the fact that cities like Frankfurt, Rome, and Venice forcibly segregated their Jewish populations by “walling them off and submitting them to onerous restrictions” (Domonoske 2014 par. 4). While these “ghettos” had gradually disintegrated by the 19th century, other neighborhoods of this relative caliber had appeared under Nazi Germany’s rule.

Although they were incredibly controlled, isolated and deprived of resources, these ghettos were not meant to last. While Jewish ghettos were abolished towards the end of World War II, the term was redefined to describe any poor, urban black community. The new definition of this word shaped positive conversation in the 60s-70s relating to poverty in ghetto-“ridden” cities like New York, Chicago, and Detroit. However, the sympathy wasn’t long lasting, as nowadays ghetto can be used as a verb, i.e. “behaving in a low class manner.” According to Los Angeles based NPR correspondent Karen Grigsby Bates, the term is “intentionally classist” and “assumes that just because one lives in the ghetto, there’s only one way to be or act.”

The dictionary definition of “ghetto” differ greatly from the connotations, as history has made it. The “restrictions” are now socioeconomic restrictions, as there is no law making it illegal to move out of a ghetto as there once was. It’s both a manmade construct and reality, being restrictive in the sense of the unequal and limited opportunity these neighborhoods provide to move up the socioeconomic ladder. While connotations serve to ignite conversation relating to problems in a variety of realms, they can also suggest where our comfort level as a society using a specific term lies. Such is the case with the term “holocaust,” according to Associate Editor Josh Fleet of the Huffington Post.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term “holocaust” has been used to describe violent deaths of large groups prior to the 18th century. The word was even used by Winston Churchill to describe the genocide of Armenians during World War I. The word derives from the Greek word *holokauston*, which means a “completely burnt offering to god” and by definition implies that “Jews and other undesirables murdered during World War II were a sacrifice to god” (Fleet 2012 par. 8) However, this is not regarded as the commonly known or even historically correct definition by multiple accounts of the holocaust. So why is the term commonly and almost definitively known as the genocide of 6 million Jews and millions of other minorities as the holocaust? (Wiki par. 30)

While the dictionary definition remains the same, society’s definition of the term has been shaped and molded over time to describe a singular genocide in history rather than a string of related genocides. According to the *Jewish Magazine*, it became common to refer to the Nazi Extermination of Jews as “the holocaust” by the 1960s. This usage is still enforced today. According to Michael Berenbaum, director of the Sigi Ziering Center for the Study of the Holocaust and Ethics at the American Jewish University, Jewish sages continuously taught that there was an underlying spiritual reason for the holocaust. The sages’ reasoning was that there was a “baseless hatred of one Jew for one another.” In this context, the term implies some “measure of guilt” among all who know of it and use it, even if they had no direct affiliation with it or were even alive during that era (Fleet 2012 par. 10).

Words aren’t the only things that can hold connotations. Symbols and figureheads in history can as well, such as the Confederate flag. Barring any legal stipulations, the flag has been a constant controversial piece regarding racism and segregation in America. While advocates for its usage regard it as a piece of mere cultural identification of the South, the opposing side argues that the flag symbolizes an acceptance for slavery and institutionalized racism that ran rampant throughout the South in the 19th century. While its original purpose and creation was to effectively distinguish the Confederacy from the Union States in battle, the historical events surrounding it have shaped people into having strong opinions of its usage on either side.

According to Yoni Applebaum of The Atlantic, merchandise displaying any symbol of the Confederate flag has been pulled from the shelves and warehouses of mega shops such as EBay, Wal-Mart, Amazon, and Sears after nine parishioners were shot to death in a historically black church in Charleston, South Carolina this past summer. This was provoked by the alleged shooter’s racially motivated crime, which sparked a nationwide protest to strip the flag from any public space or store. This alone proves how much stronger symbolism is than the initial creation and origin of not only the flag, but figureheads and words in general. While its initial creation was to accurately differentiate the South’s flag from the North’s flag, its connotation of racism and injustice has become so deeply ingrained that the initial purpose has almost been made irrelevant for anyone who opposes its utilization, especially in modern times.

Take for instance the word “tolerance.” According to Debra Davenport for the Phoenix Business Journal, tolerance is a word that has both positive and negative connotations. While Davenport agrees that tolerance is a “politically correct term chosen with good intentions,” she also acknowledges that the connotation of tolerating something is really ‘to put up’ with it. A positive one can fall under this definition; “the willingness to recognize and respect the beliefs or practices of others” (Davenport 2006 line 3). However, the negative connotation can be accurately described by the following definition; “A permissible difference; allowing the freedom to move within limits” (Davenport 2006 line 6). In her article, Davenport uses the example of appreciate vs. tolerate.

Approaching one of her students, Davenport asked her this; “’Kenya, if I said to you, 'I tolerate the fact that your skin is a different color than mine,' how would you respond?’ Well, she wasn’t too excited about that. Then I asked her, "how would you feel if I said that I really appreciate the fact that your skin is a different color than mine?’” (Davenport 2006 par. 5) Understandably, Kenya was much more enthusiastic in her response to that sentence that the one preceding it. This is yet another real life testament to the power of semantics, and how a word like tolerance can bear the weight of just as many negative implications as it can with positive ones.

Just like how words that were once largely regarded as positive words can change to have negative connotations, there are words that follow the opposite pattern. While the word “explicit” is defined as meaning to be straightforward and open rather than implied, the word is now used in modern times in parental advisories by record companies to identify musical albums with sexual, dirty, or otherwise known as “explicit lyrics”, according to William Safire of the New York Times.

Safire argues that the common usage without the modifier is to blame for the newfound connotation of the word. “The adjectival phrase was ‘sexually explicit’, until the premodifying adverb sexually was lopped off by frequent users. That left explicit to carry on alone, abandoned by the modifier that got it into trouble. Now the word has the odor of obscenity or pornography about it, while its pristine senses -- of clarity and openness -- are left out in the cold” (Safire 1991 par. 5). Our definitions of words also change as we grow up in which it’s not always the premodifier’s fault, as Safire claims with his example of the word “adult.” According to him, the word meant “grown up” or “mature”, whereas when we got older the media has given it a sense of being “not suitable for children.”

Ideologies, such as branches of feminism, rely heavily on the semantics of words to make their points on the rights and wrongs of commonly accepted thinking. In the blog Huffpost Women for the Huffington Post, Robin Lakoff, a professor of linguistics and University of California-Berkeley, discussed the connotative meaning of the term “bossy.” In her post, she argues against the “flimsy arguments” like how the term is not just applicable towards women. “Yes, indeed men can be bossy, but when they are, they are not called bossy. Rather, they are called ‘leaders;’ they are strong, assertive, and powerful” (Lakoff 2014 par. 11).

This argument is not recent. Lakoff recalls arguing in 1973 that language is “diagnostic” at best. In her argument, she contends that there are words that exist that can be used of only the members of one gender, if the same word has different meanings when used to describe one gender than the other, or if the same kind of behavior is described with one word for one gender with another for the other, positive for the first and negative for the second (“stud” vs. “slut”), then there strong evidence that males and females are being treated differently and the latter, in all probability, worse. Due to this, “even a single word can reveal larger and deeper problems in the real world,” according to Lakoff. The early second-wave women’s movement in the 1970s was consistent with attempting “gender relations by changing the language we use to talk about females vs. males” (Lakoff 2014 par. 3).

In her stance, Lakoff says that the point of her argument is not to change the word, but how the world uses and thinks of it. One of the main reasons why we as a society and global culture need to mindful of the words we speak is due to the possibly negative feelings that can be attributed to said word. Due to this, connotations are often more powerful than their actual definitions due to the attitudes and emotions attached onto a word from prior historic events, such as the words “ghetto” and “holocaust,” or symbols such as the Confederate Flag. Despite what the dictionary might say, a word that seems to have no negating quality can have one tomorrow because history is fast paced and ever changing, and language is a direct result of that.

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